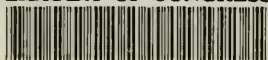


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PATRICK HENRY

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE FACULTY AND STUDENTS
OF RANDOLPH-MACON COLLEGE

DECEMBER 9TH, 1901

BY

HON. JAMES ALSTON CABELL

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PATRICK HENRY.*

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THAT generous and public-spirited gentleman, who is too modest to have his name made known, and too disinterested and unselfish to receive any public praise for his noble and patriotic act, has permitted me to say that this portrait of Patrick Henry, which he has given, and I have the honor of presenting, has been placed in your college halls in order that your young men, on the threshold of life, some of whom, doubtless, are to play a conspicuous part in the arena of life, and, may be for good or evil, influence the course and destiny of this land, may have continually before them the face of this great American as an example of pure and exalted manhood, of devotion to country, and consecration to duty. The habit of recalling examples will soon produce the habit of imitating them. We are told that the citizens of Rome placed the images of their ancestors in the vestibules of their houses, so that whenever they went in or out, those venerable statues met their eyes and recalled the glorious actions of the dead, to fire the living, to excite them to imitate and even to emulate their great forefathers. The success, says Bolingbroke, answered the design. The virtue of one generation was transmitted by the magic of example, into several; and a spirit of heroism was maintained through many ages of that commonwealth.

Unequal as I am to the duty assigned me, if what I have to say to-night shall help to lead the young men of this college to a higher appreciation of the simple grandeur, the rugged beauty, and the unaffected nobility of the character of Patrick Henry, and

*An address delivered before the faculty and students of Randolph-Macon College on the occasion of the presentation of the portrait of Patrick Henry to the Washington Literary Society, December 9, 1901, by J. Alston Cabell, Esq., of Richmond, Va.

some may be excited by the magic of his example, to imitate or even emulate the great patriot, I shall have accomplished a great object.

All men have two ways of improvement—one arising from their own experience, and one from the experience of others. In following the course of great men remember while you may not rise to the full measure of their greatness, yet you must determine not to fall below their standard of duty and obligation. Mr. Henry's career may be studied as a guide for private life as well as public station. We have no need to throw the mantle of charity over personal defects which might otherwise mar the brilliancy of his fame. His private life was as pure as his public achievements were brilliant and illustrious.

Patrick Henry was born in this grand old county of Hanover, at Studley. His youth gave no presage of his future greatness. Indeed, the few advantages his parents were able to offer him were sadly neglected. At an early age his father set him up in a little mercantile business, and he promptly made a failure of it. A year after, when he was only 18 years of age, and out of employment, he married a girl as impecunious as himself.

By the joint assistance of their parents, however, the young couple were settled on a small farm, where Henry proceeded to demonstrate as positively and as rapidly as possible, that he was no farmer, and, by the method of reduction, that his talents, if he had any, must lie in some other direction. For a second time he went into merchandise. This experiment was still more unfortunate than the first, and in a few years it left him a bankrupt. "Every atom of his property was now gone," is the description we have of his condition; "his friends were unable to assist him any further; he had tried every means of support, of which he could suppose himself capable, and every one had failed; ruin was behind him; poverty, debt, want, and famine before; and, as if his cup of misery were not already full enough, here were a suffering wife and children to make it overflow." The pressure of such overwhelming misfortune would have

crushed the life and spirit out of any but the strongest character. It was under such trials that Henry showed what great native firmness of character he possessed. "He was not one of those," as Dr. Johnson had said of Swift, "who, having lost one part of life in idleness are tempted to throw away the remainder in despair." The manliness of his character not only kept his mind from being clouded by despondency, but even gave him a cheerfulness of spirit under the most severe reverses of fortune, and showed that he was fitted to endure the buffetings of the rudest storms. As a last effort, we are told, after he had failed at everything else, he determined to make a trial of the law. Nothing but failure, dire and certain failure, was predicted; but having passed as a lawyer, Henry was a conspicuous success from the first, and he was ready when opportunity came to him. It came in the shape of what is known as the famous "Parsons Cause." You all know, or ought to know, about that celebrated controversy. It is a part of the history of Virginia, and was fought out here in this old county. The power and the intelligence of the Colony, as well as law and justice and right, were on the side of the Parsons. It seemed a desperate—a hopeless—measure for any one to undertake; even the most learned and skillful advocate. The case had been virtually decided in favor of the Parsons, and at that time, it appeared to be only a question of arithmetic to determine how much was due them. The distinguished counsel for the defendants withdrew from the case, saying he could do nothing more, and the case was hopeless. In this situation they turned, with their desperate case, to the plucky young lawyer who never lost hope and never despaired. There were a combination of circumstances surrounding the case which appealed to the selfish passions of the people. Could these passions be fanned into a storm, all considerations of law and equity would be swept out of sight. Henry saw his opportunity. "The man and the hour had met." The description of that day's triumph reads as if it were from the pen of some poet. The young attorney, through the beginning of his speech,

faltered and stammered, but by degrees his attitude became erect and lofty; the spirit of genius began to awake in all his features; his countenance shone with a nobleness and grandeur which it never before exhibited; his action became graceful, bold, and commanding, and the tones of his voice exercised a magical charm, which baffles the description of narrators. They can only say "that it struck upon the ear and upon the heart in a manner which language cannot tell." In short, "now was first witnessed that mysterious and almost supernatural transformation of appearance, which the fire of his own eloquence never failed to work in him."

When the verdict came in, the old court-house at Hanover witnessed a sight forever memorable in its history. The excited multitude, in defiance of the Court and the resistance of the officers, seized their hero, bore him aloft out of the court-house, and around the court green with shouts of triumphant joy.

Never was success at the bar more sudden or more complete, and he at once took a place at the head of his profession. But Mr. Henry was destined for greater work and more exalted service. King George and the British Ministry did not intend to let him expend his transcendent eloquence on law cases in Hanover and Louisa. The great political arena was to be the field of his glory, and there was the dazzling brilliance of his genius to be displayed. Henry entered the House of Burgesses about the time that the British Ministry sent them a copy of the Stamp Act, as the only reply to their petitions and remonstrances against such a high-handed violation of the ancient constitutional rights of the Colonies. The question of the hour was, what was to be done about it. It was now the law of the land, and was soon to go into effect. The time for remonstrance had passed. To submit to it quietly would be to reduce the colony to a state of slavery, but those who had guided the course of Virginia, when they considered her weak and defenseless condition, were unwilling to think of resistance. It was at such a time that Patrick

Henry, a new member and an almost unknown man, introduced his ever-memorable resolutions, and dictated the policy of Virginia.

Mr. Jefferson says that by these resolutions Mr. Henry took the lead out of the hands of those who had hitherto guided the proceedings of the House, and after the debate, which he says was "bloody," there was no longer a question among the body of the people as to Mr. Henry's being the first statesman and orator of Virginia. Indeed, from that time he became the idol of the people.

Mr. Henry, who was more indifferent to the preservation of the records and credentials of his career than any of our public men, in the final survey of his career, regarded the introduction of these resolutions as the one most important thing he ever did. Along with his will was found a copy of these resolutions, sealed up, and directed to his executors. He seemed to care for the preservation of no other evidence of his public service. After describing the circumstances of their preservation and adoption, and stating that they established the point of resistance to British taxation and brought on the war which established American independence, he added these memorable words, which cannot be too often recalled by every American citizen: "Whether this will prove a blessing or a curse, will depend upon the use our people make of the blessings which a gracious God hath bestowed on us. If they are wise, they will be great and happy. If they are of a contrary character, they will be miserable. Righteousness alone can exalt them as a nation. Reader! whoever thou art, remember this, and in thy sphere practice virtue thyself and encourage it in others."

A Northern historian, Moses Coit Tyler, speaking of these resolutions and their consequences, says: "Meanwhile, on the wings of the wind, and on the eager tongues of men, had been borne past recall, far northward and far southward, the fiery unchastised words of nearly the entire series to kindle in all the colonies a great flame of dauntless purpose." And after setting

forth the effects produced by them, continues: "All these facts, and many more that might be produced, seem to point to the Virginia resolutions of 1765 as having come at a crisis of the Revolution—and as having then uttered, with trumpet voice, the very word that was fitted to the hour and that gave to men's minds clearness of vision and to their hearts a settled purpose."

On the 24th of May, 1774, the House of Burgesses received the alarming news of the passage of the Boston port bill. They designated the day on which it was to take effect—June 1st—as a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer, devoutly implored the Divine interposition for averting the heavy calamity which threatened destruction to their civil rights and the evils of civil war, to give them one heart and one mind firmly to oppose, by all just and proper means every injury to American rights, etc. Lord Dunmore was so incensed at their action that he immediately dissolved the House. The members, however, met at the Raleigh Tavern, passed resolutions, and set on foot plans for the establishment of an annual Congress of all the colonies. During the conferences held at this period we are told "Patrick Henry was the leader." George Mason wrote of him at the time: "He is by far the most powerful speaker I ever heard. * * * But his eloquence is the smallest part of his merit. He is, in my opinion, the first man upon this Continent, as well in abilities as public virtues."

In the Continental Congress which assembled at Philadelphia on the 5th of September, 1774, Mr. Henry at once sprang to the front as a leader. "Even those who had heard him in all his glory in the House of Burgesses of Virginia, were astonished at the manner in which his talents seemed to swell and expand themselves to fill the vaster theatre in which he was now placed, and as he had been before proclaimed the greatest orator in Virginia, he was now on every hand admitted to be the first orator in America." It was not as an orator alone that Mr. Henry made a reputation in that distinguished body. After more than seven weeks spent in the closest intellectual intimacy with fifty of the

ablest men in America, his fame spread throughout the colonies, and his distinguished associates were impressed not only with his eloquence, but also with his intelligence, integrity, and power.

But the most brilliant act in his wonderful career was yet to come.

When the Virginia delegates assembled in convention on March the 20th, 1775, in the Old Church in Richmond, the sentiments which still influenced many of the leading members were strongly loyal. They recited with great feeling the series of grievances under which the colonies had labored, and insisted with great firmness on their constitutional rights, but they were most explicit in pledging their faith and allegiance to King George III., and avowing their determination to support him with their lives and fortunes in the legal exercise of all his just rights and prerogatives. They sincerely wished for a return of friendly intercourse with Great Britain and were averse to any means of violence. It was not so with Patrick Henry. He had long since read the true character of the British Court, and saw that no alternative remained, but abject submission or heroic resistance. The convention, which was dominated by the delegates from the lower counties, opened very mildly, and bid fair to be a session of earnest remonstrance and humble supplication but the delegates from the upper country were fired with quite a different spirit, and they found a leader in Henry around whom they could rally. Like a thunderbolt he hurled his ringing resolutions into the convention. He was, indeed, infused with the bold spirit of the patriotic representatives of the upper country. The time for supplication and remonstrance had passed. A militia must be established, said the resolutions, for the protection and defence of the country, and to secure our inestimable rights and liberties from the further violations with which they have been threatened. The Colony must be immediately put into a state of defense and a committee appointed to prepare a plan for embodying, arming, and discipling such a number of men, as would be sufficient for the purpose.

The men who had been all powerful and had hitherto shaped the course of the colony were dumbfounded, the wealthy land-owners on the seaboard were filled with alarm and consternation, and even men of such well-known patriotism as Richard Bland, Benjamin Harrison, and Robert C. Nicholas violently opposed the resolutions. They insisted that filial respect demanded the exercise of patience. Urged the conciliatory temper that had lately been professed by the King and his Ministers, the endearing character of the ties that had hitherto connected Virginia with the Mother Country, the strength and lustre we derived from our connection with her, the utter hopelessness of a contest, and that it would be time enough to resort to measures of despair when hope had entirely vanished.

Mr. Wirt says of Patrick Henry: "His was a spirit fitted to raise the whirlwind, as well as to ride in and direct it." If his resolutions had startled the convention by their daring and defiant tone, the wonderful speech with which he supported them was able to lift his hearers to the heights from which he viewed the situation and fire their souls for action. He rose with a majesty unusual to him in an exordium, and with all that self-possession by which he was so invariably distinguished. But with him it was no time for ceremony. The question before the House was one of awful moment to the country. It was nothing less than a question of freedom or slavery. He wished the people to know the whole truth—to know the worst and to provide for it. He pointed to the warlike preparations of Great Britain, which could be intended only to bind and rivet upon the colonies those chains which the British Ministry had been so long forging. Entreaty and humble supplication had been exhausted. It was vain to indulge in the fond hope of peace and reconciliation. Unless they meant basely to abandon the noble struggle in which they had been so long engaged, "We must fight!" he exclaimed with all the power of his impassioned eloquence. "I repeat it, sir, we must fight! An appeal to arms and to the God of hosts is all that is left us!" But I need not repeat here how he met the

arguments of the peace party, nor attempt to recite his flaming words, that rang like a trumpet-call to arms—swept the convention like a whirlwind, gaining in strength and power as its tones vibrated beyond the borders of Virginia, until they thrilled every heart in the remotest part of the Colonies. “Is life so dear, or peace so sweet,” he ended, “as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”

He took his seat, said Wirt. No murmur of applause was heard. The effect was too deep. After the trance of a moment, several members started from their seats. The cry, “To arms!” seemed to quiver on every lip, and gleam from every eye! His supernatural voice still sounded in their ears, and shivered along their arteries. They heard in every pause the cry of liberty or death. They became impatient of speech—their souls were on fire for action.

Henry was not the man to content himself with urging a resort to arms and then leave it to others to carry on the conflict, or to shrink from dangers to which he deemed it necessary to expose his fellow-countrymen. He at once threw himself, heart and soul, into the movement he had set on foot by his eloquence. “We find him assuming the character of a military leader,” says Everett, “and discharging its duties with a spirit and efficiency which seemed to show that, if circumstances of a wholly accidental nature had not checked his progress, his energies would probably have taken this direction, and given him as high a rank among the warriors of his country as he has in fact obtained among her orators and statesmen.”

The first overt act of war in Virginia, as Jefferson testifies, was committed by Patrick Henry. The first armed resistance to a Royal Governor was made in Virginia under his direction and inspiration almost as early as that made by the “embattled farmers” at Lexington and Concord. In the first organization of the Revolutionary army in Virginia the chief command was

given to him. Why he did not retain this command involves a discussion we cannot go into here. It is sufficient to say that no blame or discredit ever attached to him. Instead, however, of showing discontent and resentment at the treatment he received, he used all his influence with his troops to repress their contemplated demonstrations in his favor and to make them, as he said to them himself, the glorious instruments of saving their country. He showed then, as at all times in his career, his exalted character and his unselfish devotion to his country.

For any passing mortification he may have been occasioned, he soon received ample satisfaction from his grateful fellow-countrymen. As a signal-mark of public favor he was designated as the first Chief Executive of Virginia, an office which he three times filled. In fact, there was no office or post of honor that could be conferred by his people that was not at his disposal. As Governor, as a member of the Conventions, as a member of Congress, in every position in which he was placed, and at all times and under all circumstances, he was, as he, indeed, said he considered himself to be, in his speech before the Convention of 1788, "the servant of the people of this Commonwealth; as a sentinel over their rights, liberty, and happiness."

What he might have achieved as a soldier, had he continued in the service, we can never know; but as Mr. Grigsby said: "That he would not have made a better fighter than Jay, or Livingston, or the Adamses; that he might not have made as dashing a partisan as Tarleton or Simcoe, his friends might readily afford to concede; but that he evinced what neither Jay, nor Livingston, nor the Adamses did evince—a determined resolution to stake his reputation and his life on the issue of arms—and that he resigned his commission when the post of imminent danger was refused him, exhibited a lucid proof that, whatever may have been his ultimate fortune, he was not deficient in two grand elements of military success—personal enterprise and unquestioned courage."

When George Rogers Clark, "the Hannibal of the West," laid his plans before Mr. Henry, then Governor, his sagacious mind

at once grasped the vast benefit it would be to the future of the country, if the campaign should prove successful, and the assistance he rendered Clark must always be remembered in connection with the conquest of the Northwestern Territory by the gallant young Virginian. ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕

It was Patrick Henry, indeed, who lit the fires of the Revolution, and called armies up from the valleys and down from the mountains' heights to battle for the birthrights of man. Such was the spirit of the times, and such the very atmosphere itself, that no true man could live without being infused with an ardent love of liberty and a high conception of duty and responsibility. But with Henry the love of liberty was a passion. It was to him what "alone gives the flower of fleeting life its lustre and perfume." His high spirit "could endure chains nowhere patiently; and chains at home where he was free by birthright, not at all."

It is well with any land when her great men are sincere in their faith, devoted and unselfish in their love of country, and pure in their lives. It is said of Patrick Henry: "His morals were strict. As a husband, a father, a master, he had no superior. He was kind and hospitable to the stranger and most friendly and accommodating to his neighbors. In his dealings with the world, he was faithful to his promises, and punctual in his contracts to the utmost of his power." "Keep justice, keep truth," was his injunction to John Randolph. "Righteousness alone can exalt them as a nation," was his declared belief. "Virtue, morality, and religion alone renders us invincible," he wrote to a friend. Well might Virginia point with pride to such a son and say, "Imitate my Henry."

His last act was in response to a call from his great chief, and, as he believed, from his country.

The one great passionate love of Richelieu was France. In a dramatic part of the play that bears his name, the old Cardinal is on the stage—dying. In a few moments death will bring rest and quiet to the tired, wearied, old man, whose life has been one long scene of strife and warfare, and peace at last is settling

upon him. Alarming news suddenly arrives; the helpless Prince rushes to the death-bed of the great man and begs him to live for the sake of France! At that name he arouses himself and struggles with death, as did Hercules over the body of Alcestis, and comes out the victor. In Mr. Henry's old age, long after he had retired from the active pursuits of life, and but one week after he had written Mr. Blair that he was too old and infirm ever again to undertake public concerns, he received an earnest appeal begging him to come forward as a candidate for the next General Assembly, where he would have to face a stupendous task. The appeal was from General Washington, who believed the country was in great danger. He at once declared himself a candidate for the Legislature, old and infirm as he was. He was elected, but death claimed him before he ^{could take} ~~took~~ his seat.

"Thus lived, and thus died, the celebrated Patrick Henry, of Virginia—a man who justly deserves to be ranked among the highest ornaments and noblest benefactors of his country. Had his lot been cast in the republics of Greece or Rome, his name would have been enrolled by some immortal pen among the expellers of tyrants and the champions of liberty; the proudest monuments of national gratitude would have arisen in his honor, and handed down his memory to future generations."





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